

'For what shall we pray?'
The Golden Lecture for the Haberdashers' Livery Company
Tuesday 30th April 2013 at St Bartholomew the Less, Smithfield

For what shall we pray?

Most people pray. Prior to the inauguration of the new Archbishop of Canterbury's ministry, Justin Welby spent a few days on a Prayer Pilgrimage. The numbers who turned out to pray with him were astonishing - 3,000 in a morning in Truro. Most people still think that to be human is to be religious - "there's more to life than meets the eye" - and prayer is as natural as breathing, even if it's only 'God help us'. As Santayana said, "There aren't many atheists on a battlefield."

Prayer is an instinctive response to Creation and to God. The poet Thomas Traherne wrote:

Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven;
see yourself in your Father's Palace; and look upon the skies, the earth, and air as
Celestial Joys.

Thomas Traherne, Meditation 28

The Church, as with each of the world's religious traditions, has a treasury of prayers and a body of experience to teach us to pray, better, deeper. Christians are people who are formed by Scripture and the community of the Church as well as by our common experience of life in God's creation.

The English like to think of religion as private and personal, but when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he began, "Our Father..." We live in a community of faith. The Christian life is entered by baptism and involves love of God and love of neighbour. We learn to pray both individually and in the wider community of faith.

Salisbury Cathedral vividly exemplifies what is the case in most churches. We enter the Christian life and the Church by the font, through baptism. The large space between the font and the east window is for prayer, contemplation and for worship, which is the purpose of life. Christianity is for worship; doing good is a consequence and test of it.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Luke 4:18-20



*Font, William Pye, 2008; Prisoners of Conscience window, Gabriel Loire, 1981
Salisbury Cathedral*

The east window in Salisbury is dedicated to Prisoners of Conscience. It is very dark blue which is populated by people hard to see, even close too. From bottom left to top right it's as if a door has been opened giving light to people in darkness. Immediately below the window in the Trinity Chapel at the east end of the cathedral we pray for the work of Amnesty International. For 40 years the diocese of Salisbury has had a link with the Episcopal Church of the Sudans. In this worship space we are challenged by God who comes among us to let the oppressed go free.

Lord, teach us to pray

There's quite a lot in the teaching of Jesus about prayer. Much of the teaching of Jesus is in the form of stories. It is not systematic. Taken literally some is paradoxical, perhaps even contradictory.

Beware of practising your piety before others... go into a room and pray in secret; and you Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:1

Don't heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words... your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Matthew 6:7

Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

Matthew 7:7-11

Prayer and action are linked, as in the prayer Jesus gave his disciples who asked him to teach them to pray: "Forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sin against us". It is the person who has been forgiven much who will love much. What you do and who you are, are intimately connected.

The little we know about the twelve disciples makes them seem very human. They were not gathered by Jesus because they were good. Matthew was a tax collector, not much loved then or now. James and John, "the sons of thunder", would be sent on an anger management course nowadays. They asked to sit on either side of Jesus in glory. It made the other disciples very cross. Matthew's Gospel blames their mother, probably to lessen the embarrassment. Mothers!

When Jesus at the Last Supper came to wash the disciples' feet Peter asked how Jesus could wash his feet. Despite having journeyed with Jesus, Thomas asked Jesus, "How can we know the way?" and Philip asked him to "Show us the Father". They didn't see what was under their nose, but as in the best tutorials no question is too stupid, no-one written-off and the Gospel shows people transformed by the love of God. In the Gospels, as in prayer, asking questions changes people's lives.

New Testament stories often hinge on questions

We are in the Easter season. One of the striking things about the Resurrection stories is that the disciples, who were so familiar with Jesus, did not necessarily recognise him. Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb turned and saw a man she took to be the gardener. In paintings Jesus is sometimes depicted with a hat and spade to make the point. In this new reality everyone is asking questions. "Woman, why are you weeping?" asked the man/ gardener/ Jesus. "Sir, if you have carried him away", she replied, "tell me where you have laid him?" It is in his calling her by name, "Mary", that she knows him.

The road to Emmaus: "Are you the only stranger who does not know?"

It is similar with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke's account of that first Easter evening. Jesus joined them on the road but they do not know him. Caravaggio makes the point by depicting Jesus without his customary beard. The stranger asked what they were discussing and they replied by asking if he was the only stranger in Jerusalem who did not know the things that have taken place?

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures.

Luke 24:27

The two disciples, who must also have been familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, did not understand that what had happened the previous three days in Jerusalem was "according to the Scriptures". Questions unlocked what was familiar but not as expected.

When they reached Emmaus the disciples invited the stranger to stay the night.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight.

Luke 24:30,31



*Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, The Supper at Emmaus, 1601
The National Gallery, London*

In the familiar Eucharistic action he was recognised and gone; in that moment breaking into our time and space for eternity.

The Gospels are written in the knowledge of and from the perspective of Easter.

The Good Samaritan: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Lawyers (and religious professionals) are given a tough time in the Gospels. A lawyer stood up to test Jesus.

Teacher,” the lawyer said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
Jesus said to him,
“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”
Luke 10:25-26

He knew the Law and could answer with the commandments.

For Jews, keeping the commandments is the mark of keeping faith with God. The lawyer summarised the Law, ‘Love God and love your neighbour as yourself’ and Jesus said he was right. Now, go and do it.

Again, the problem is not that the lawyer did not know the Scriptures. He didn’t know their meaning.



*Jacopo Bassano, The Good Samaritan, c. 1562-3
The National Gallery, London*

“Wanting to **justify** himself” - there’s the problem; none of us can justify ourselves - the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” There were a number of possible answers in Scripture: our family, kindred, tribe; people like us, Jews; or our neighbour could be the stranger, the outsider and that’s the answer Jesus gave.

So Jesus told a story about a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest and a Levite passed by on the other side because they had a higher duty. If the priest and Levite had touched a dead body they would have been spoilt the purity of their visit to the Temple. So they passed by on the other side for good religious reason.

But a Samaritan was moved with pity and took care of him.

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

Luke 10:36

The lawyer couldn’t even say the name, for Jews despised Samaritans. He said,

“The one who showed him mercy.”

Luke 10:37

For Jews at the time of Jesus the idea of there being a good Samaritan was an oxymoron. In telling a story in which a despised outsider showed even a Jewish lawyer the meaning of the Jewish Law, Jesus was teaching non-tribal religion.

The Road to Emmaus and The Good Samaritan both begin with questions. For good religious people they are salutary because from within the New Testament people who knew the Scriptures missed God's meaning. To be Biblical is not sufficient. The interpretation of Scripture matters, otherwise we risk being like the disciples who didn't 'get it' or the lawyer who knew the commandments but missed the weightier demands of the law and show mercy to the neighbour.

They were like the majority of Christians a little over 200 years ago who supported slavery because it was Biblical and part of the God-given order of creation. Or like the South African Dutch Reformed Church until 25 years ago who supported Apartheid because it was Biblical and part of the God-given order of creation. No one now thinks slavery or Apartheid right. The Biblical texts have not changed, our interpretation has.

The Ethiopian Eunuch: "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Christianity became a missionary religion because of the resurrection which sent the Church outwards with good news for all people.

In the Acts of the Apostles there is a story in chapter 8 about the baptism of an Ethiopian Eunuch. It sounds exotic to us and its meaning is no longer obvious, but it is one of the great missionary stories of the New Testament.

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'

Acts 8:26

This is the wilderness road to Gaza. What we are about to hear is desert experience.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury.

Acts 8:27

The Gospel is going south, outwards from the Jewish world to Gentiles and the Ethiopian is an African, a black man, from the edge of the known world. In Greek the word eunuch means 'the keeper of the bed chamber'. In other words he is a safe, and in himself powerless, male. Such people could be trusted to look after other people's privacy, or power, or wealth, as with the queen of Ethiopia's treasury. Throughout Mesopotamia eunuchs were given sensitive personal and political roles.

In Israel eunuchs were despised and were outcasts. Deuteronomy 23:1 could not be more graphic a piece of legislation making it clear that eunuchs shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord:

No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

Now this eunuch was riding in his chariot down the desert road reading from the prophet Isaiah. These were some of the verses in Isaiah 53 about the suffering servant that the early church used so unexpectedly to identify Jesus as that sort of Messiah:

Like a sheep that is led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.
Isaiah 53:7-8

And if we read on, Isaiah 56 promises that after the restoration of Israel, the faithful eunuchs and foreigners will be gathered to the house of the Lord. The outcast will be gathered in.



St Philip baptises an Ethiopian Eunuch, Aelbert Cuyp, c. 1655
National Trust, Anglesey Abbey, Cambridgeshire

Philip ran up to the chariot and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading? He climbed in and, starting with the Scripture, proclaimed the good news about Jesus. When they saw water, on the wilderness road, the Ethiopian eunuch asked, “What is to stop me from being baptised?” Nothing can stop him: even faithful eunuchs and foreigners will be gathered into the house of the Lord.

For what shall we pray?

For Jesus and the great Christian teachers of prayer the key question is, 'What do you want?' I used to ask that of the parents of infants to be baptised: what do you want for your child? A young mother on the Isle of Dogs came back quick as a flash: "I want him to have health and happiness, and", there was a slight hesitation, "and wealth." Pause. "Oh no, I don't believe I just said that. I'm so embarrassed."

"Ask, and it will be given to you", said Jesus, so what's wrong? The last I heard of that young man he was working in the City, not with an investment banker's salary and bonus but compared with many in this world in which 2 billion live on less than \$2 a day, he is exceptionally well off. So his mother's prayer has been answered but she was embarrassed, so I asked her why? She said, "It's because money isn't everything and what matters much more is that he is loved and makes good relationships".

Sometime before the economic crash, the chairman of a bank told me his company had a problem. All their really clever investment bankers wanted to make as much money as possible by their early 40's so they could leave and go and do something useful. He said they didn't really believe banking is a public good. They saw it as the means for them to get rich and make enough money to go and do something worthwhile. Their chairman believed that banking is in and of itself worthwhile and useful and potentially good.

'For what shall we pray?' Wealth is good, it's in our nature to be creative, like the creator who made us. But if we are only concerned with making money, which is not at all the same thing as wealth, we'll get into trouble. If we are not concerned to do something good, for ourselves and others, we will simply exploit the systems for selfish gains that cannot be sustained, will wreck society and, in the end, wreck ourselves.

The Papal Encyclical on the economy written by Pope Benedict in 2009 is called 'Caritas et Veritate', Love and Truth. I don't suppose those words feature much in business strategies, nor the related concepts in the encyclical of social justice and the common good. When I talked about this on local radio last week the interviewer said that if I used words like that in the City I would be laughed at. "Business is about making wealth", he said; but we need beliefs and values to underpin how we make wealth as well as how we distribute it.

It helps us to ask, 'For what shall we pray?', because the question deepens the answer, and in the end the answer we are seeking is not our own but God's: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Prayer is about seeking God's will and finding the commitment to do it. Prayer is unlikely to tell us the answer to specific questions about City pay and bonuses but it asks the questions and sets their discussion in a different sort of framework in which our obligations to God and one another are as pressing as the individual's rewards.

"For what shall we pray?" is a question that creates vision and directs action but it also brings judgement. Perhaps that is what will change us and cause us to repent, to turn round, for the forgiveness of sins which is the start of the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels and is the repeated experience of those who seek to follow in the way of Jesus Christ.

The Walking Madonna

There are three great contemporary artistic commissions in Salisbury Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary: William Pye's font, Gabriel Loire's Prisoners of Conscience window and Elizabeth Frink's Walking Madonna.



*Elizabeth Frink, Walking Madonna, 1981
Salisbury Cathedral*

Mary “magnifies the Lord”. She is walking away from her cathedral with its sacred space between the front and east window in which it is quite possible to ‘have the experience and miss the meaning’ that the love of God in Jesus Christ is good news for everyone: women and men, Samaritans and Jews, foreigners and eunuchs. She is walking towards the city in the way that happens at the end of every service when the priest tells to the people to go out and get on with the work of God in the world God made and loves. It is in that interplay of Church and world that we challenge and encourage one another about what it means to love God and neighbour: “For what shall we pray?”